Avatar: How Iroh's Tea Confirmed His Avatar Status

Uncle Iroh is often considered a symbolic Avatar, and his passion for tea reflects that. Tea unites people and the elements alike.

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Avatar: The Last Airbender is a Western animated story taking place in an Asian-inspired fantasy world where the four elements, and the four nations, are meant to co-exist in harmony. It's up to the Avatar, a unique being gifted with the light of Raava, to maintain that balance, but the world has a few unofficial Avatars as well.

These characters embody all that the Avatar stands for, even if they can't bend the four elements or visit the spirit realm on their own. Toph's daughter Suyin Beifong is like that, and so is Uncle Iroh, who expanded his mind and his bending far beyond the confines of his native Fire Nation. Even his hobby of brewing and drinking tea reflects his unofficial Avatar status in surprising ways.

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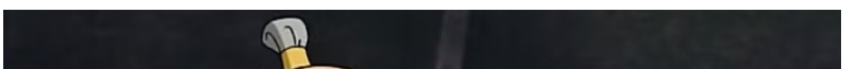

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Uncle Iroh's love of tea is more than a character quirk -- it represents his Avatar-like mindset in a physical and symbolic sense alike. On a physical level, as fans have noted, brewing and consuming tea involves all four elements, with no bending required. To begin with, a farmer must cultivate tea leaves in a garden, and that involves planting the seeds in the fertile earth and nourishing them with water and the sun's rays. With the sun being linked to firebending, that means three elements are involved just in growing tea -- and that's not all.

Once the tea leaves are matured in the earth, the farmer can harvest them, and then a consumer may buy them and use the elements once again to prepare a drink. Now that the earth has done its job, the mature tea leaves can be stewed in water and heated with fire, and then the drinker may gently blow across the tea's surface to cool it down before taking a sip. Blowing on the tea involves air, and thus, the four elements have finally come together.

Humorously, Iroh used a bit of firebending to heat some cold tea in a station just outside Ba Sing Se, which Zuko scolded him for, but the idea is the same. With or without bending, tea is only possible when the elements are in harmony, and Iroh, who has studied the other elements, would understand that. If he can learn to redirect lightning just from watching waterbenders at work, surely he would realize that tea is what unites the elements -- and for that matter, it units people, too. For the Avatar, bending the four elements is just the start.

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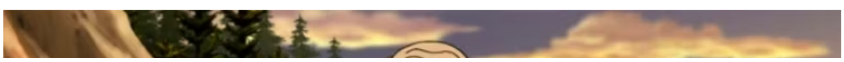

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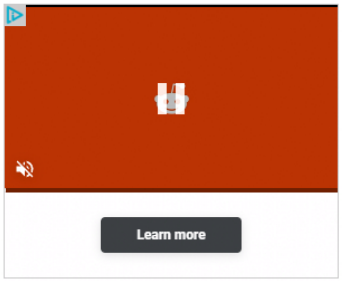
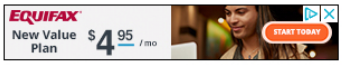
Iroh's tea embodies the four elements in a physical sense, but the Avatar is ultimately about bringing people together in peace and harmony, and tea can accomplish that too. Tea is a gentle and beloved drink that anyone in any nation or culture can appreciate, and in works of fiction and real life alike, innocent and neutral hobbies like these can bring together people who are otherwise very different.

This was demonstrated when Iroh and a troubled Toph Beifong ran into one another on a remote Earth Kingdom road. Despite their differences, the two of them enjoyed freshly-brewed tea together, and they had an amiable conversation that ended in Iroh inspiring Toph on many levels. Toph had no idea who Iroh was or where he came from, but Iroh, who certainly recognized Toph as an Earth Kingdom native, focused on what they had in common -- a love of tea -- rather than what set them apart. That's how an Avatar thinks.



On a larger scale, Iroh's tea helped unite peoples of different cultures in Ba Sing Se, when Iroh and Zuko worked at a teashop before Iroh obtained his own popular shop, the Jasmine Dragon. He may have been born in the Fire Nation, but his loyalty was to peace, joy and tea, not politics or war, and tea brought people together in his shop. Here, people from all nations and backgrounds could come together for a drink, and that microcosm of peace and harmony reflects the Avatar's duty to the world. In the Avatar's eyes, people are people, no matter their origins or bending style, and only through peaceful understanding and cooperation can progress be made. Sharing ideas over a cup of tea is a fine start.



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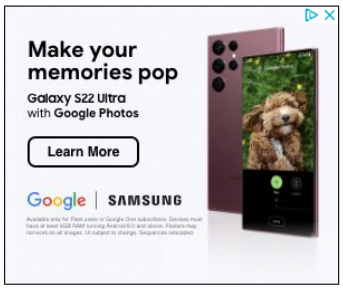

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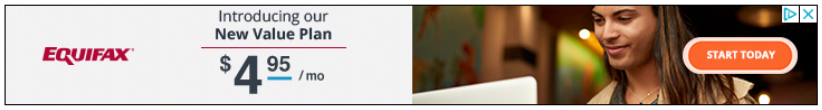

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